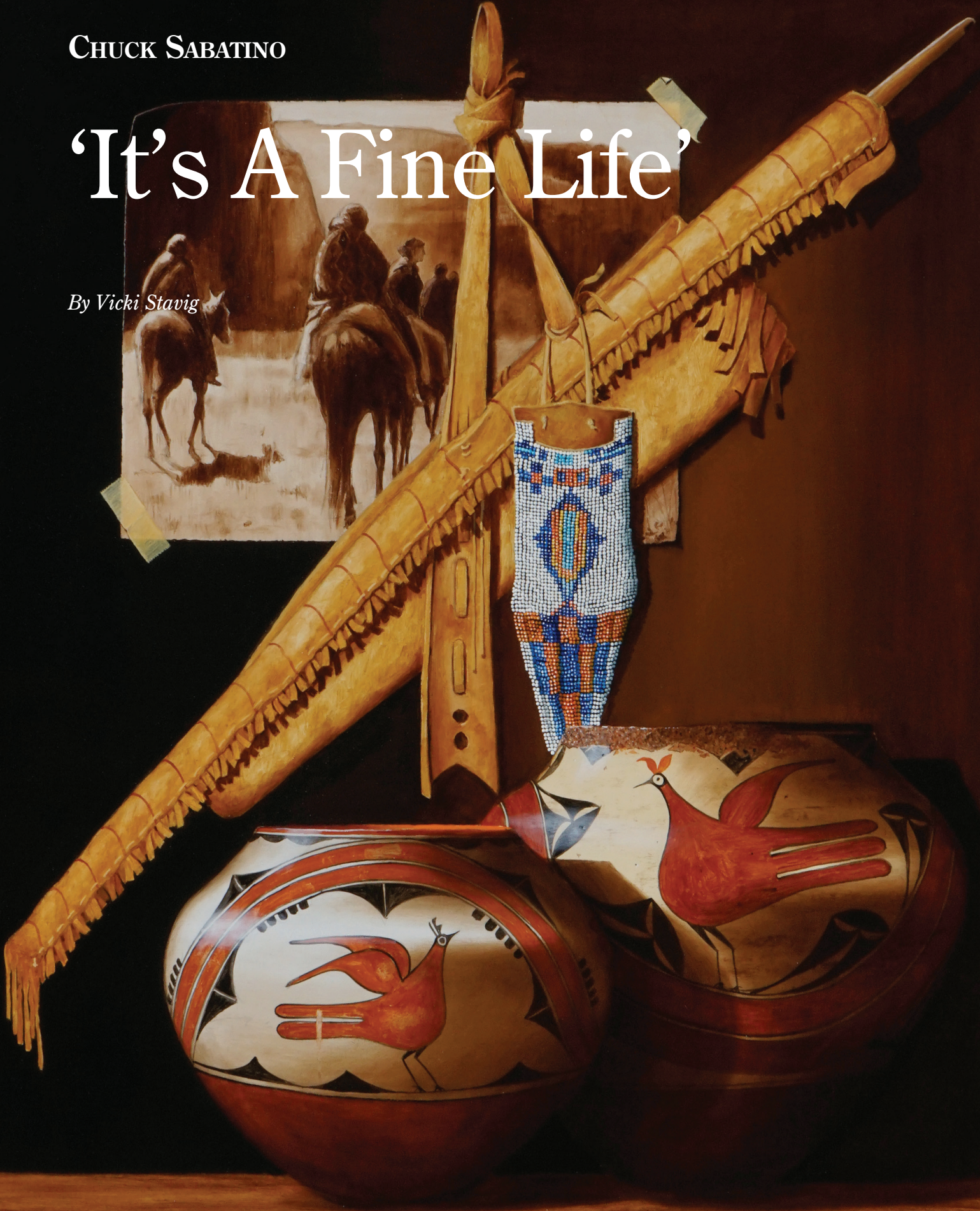
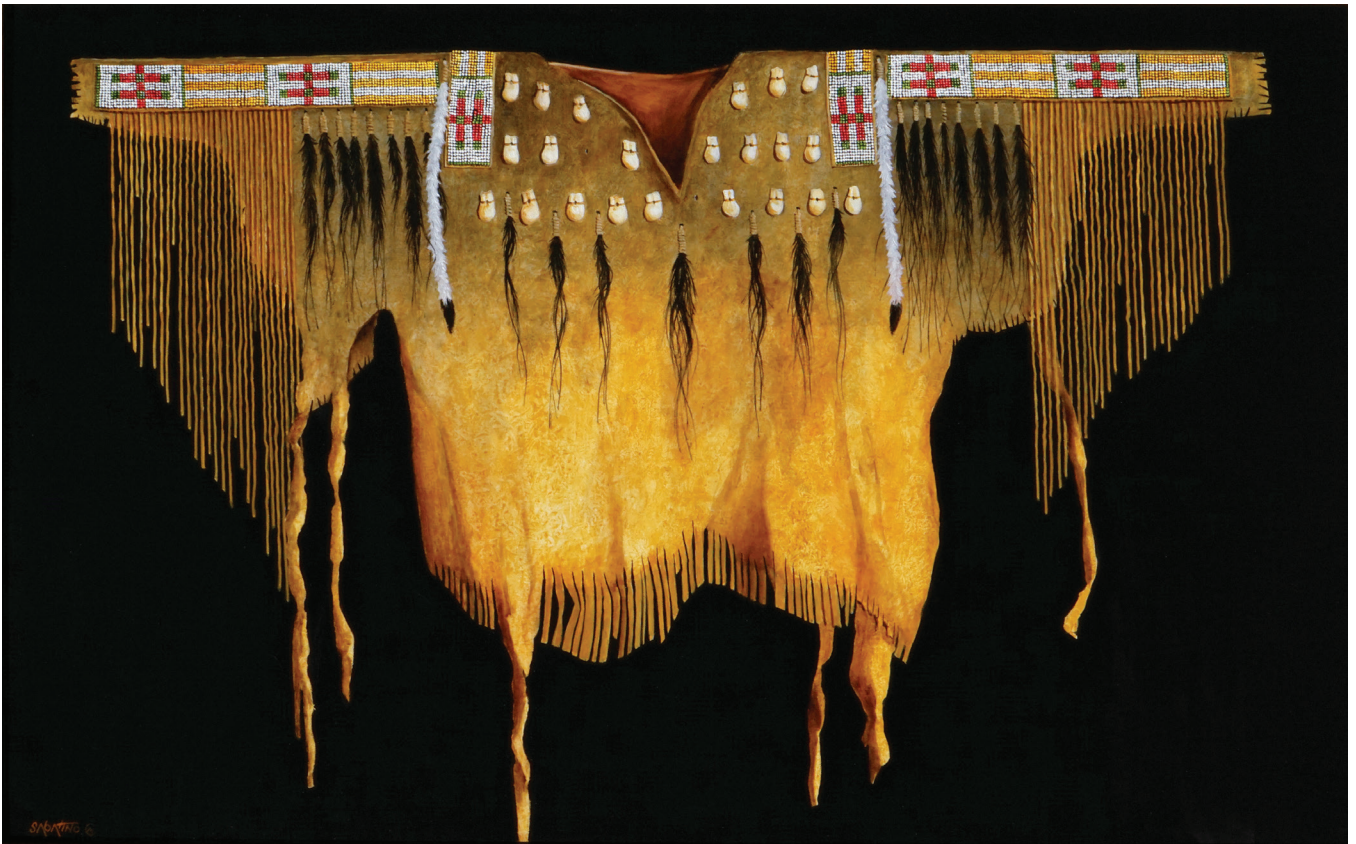


CHUCK SABATINO

'It's A Fine Life'

By Vicki Stavig





Cheyenne Dog Soldiers Shirt, oil, 30" by 48"

"The Dog Soldiers were a military society comprised of Southern Cheyenne, Northern Cheyenne, and Lakota. The name Dog Soldiers arose from the Cheyenne legend that tells of dogs transforming into fierce and fearsome fighters."

“I’m 88 years old. I still love to paint, so I’m in the studio every day,” says Chuck Sabatino, whose paintings have been wowing art aficionados for almost four decades. “I also love to golf with friends and am not very good at it. They tell me, ‘Stay home and paint!’”

While Sabatino loves golfing, he loves painting more. That’s why he’s in the studio at his home in north Scottsdale, Arizona, seven days a week. He arrives there at 9 a.m.

each day and works until about 2 p.m., following that with reading and doing research for future paintings. “I read most everything I can find about Native tribes of the 1800s,” he says. “The 1880s seem to be when they were most active.”

Sabatino’s paintings feature a myriad of Native American artifacts, from pottery, beaded moccasins, and an 1885 Cheyenne tobacco bag to headdresses, soldier shirts, and pottery. His detailed, beautifully rendered works have attracted collectors from throughout the world, some of whom stop by to visit him at his studio when they travel to Arizona.

Born in 1935 in the Bronx, a borough of New York City, Sabatino has

been fascinated with the West since he was a young boy going to Western movies. That fascination took a giant step forward when he and his classmates visited the Museum of the American Indian in Manhattan while on a class trip. “I saw all these Indian artifacts, and I loved them,” he says.

Drawing had occupied much of Sabatino’s life when he was a young boy, so it was no surprise to anyone

when he enrolled at the School of Cartoonists and Illustrators (later renamed the School for Visual Arts) in New York City. He completed the advertising and

graphic arts program and, following a stint as a guided missile specialist with the U.S. Army, he went on to

“I try to keep the hand of the artist in there.”

(Left) E.S. Curtis The Vanishing Race, oil, 40" by 30"

“A somber photo of Indians riding into a bleak future, leaving behind a colorful past.”

"Dresses like this one are important symbols of prestige because they can have as many as 500 elk teeth. It reflects a woman's sewing skills and her male family's hunting skills."

work as an art director for Compton Advertising, a large agency in New York.

Sabatino was soon promoted to TV producer and director, a position that would change his life—and, eventually, his career—and, during the next 30 years, won 24 awards for his work and was twice nominated for the advertising industry's coveted Cleo Award. While he loved his work, he loved his wife, Millie, who was designing children's clothing, even more.

Responsible for creating commercials for Jeep, which were to be filmed in the Arizona desert, he told his superiors, "Either my wife travels with me or I won't go," he recalls. "They agreed. She also became my hand model and a member of SAG [Screen Actors Guild]. Whatever we do, we do together. We love each other and are always here for each other. It's a great partnership; we celebrated our 65th anniversary last October. She's a jeweler and has space in my studio. Her jewelry is very contemporary sterling silver."

Sabatino, who had started collecting Indian artifacts from various tribes while shooting commercials in Arizona and New Mexico, retired as a senior vice president and art director and producer at Saatchi & Saatchi in 1988. He and Millie had fallen in love with the Scottsdale area and started building their home and studio on five acres there in 1987 and moved in the following year.

"I love the cactus and the freedom out here," he says. "I had started collecting Indian artifacts—pottery and beaded bags—when I was shooting commercials in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I like antique pieces; I never use new ones. I have a lot of interesting things." The ar-



(Above left) *Paraphernalia of a Sioux Warrior*, oil, 46" by 30"

"Just a glimpse into what a warrior might need in his everyday life."

(Above right) *1880's Cheyenne Tobacco Bag*, oil, 36" by 10"

"To me, this tobacco bag is one of the most beautiful bags made. The simplicity of color is wonderful."



tifact he treasures most, he says, is a San Ildefonso polychrome pot that dates back to before the 1900s, something he includes in many of

his paintings.

Over the years, Sabatino has collected other items as well, including animal skulls and old shooting tar-

gets. He scaled back on those items when Millie put her foot down and declared, "Enough!" He continues, however, to collect works by artists



A Gray Day in the Badlands, oil, 30" by 24"

"The Lakota people have called this area Mako Sica, which translates to literally 'bad lands.' Extreme temperatures, lack of water, and the exposed rugged terrain led to this name."



Canyon de Chelly and Casa Blanca Lilies, oil, 30" by 48"

"My wife suggested I put flowers in some of my paintings and I agreed. After a few tries, I found Casa Blanca and calla lilies worked. White flowers worked well with the colorful pottery."

he admires and has about 15 pieces in his living room alone. "We have a lot of art," he says. "Some are early California Impressionists and others are very contemporary."

Sabatino started selling his paintings on street corners with other artists during what he calls Thunderbird Shows. "I painted everything, but mostly Indian artifacts, and they sold right away," he says. "I got noticed by a few galleries and, before I knew it, I was in eight galleries. I was pretty prolific."

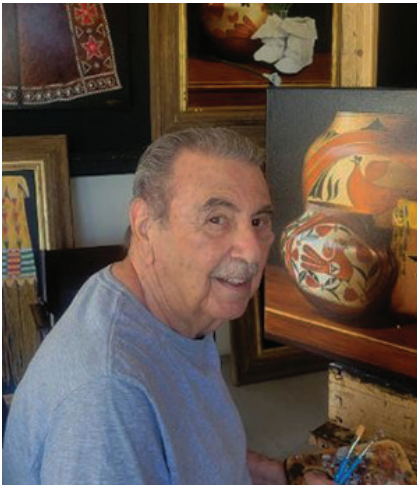
He was indeed, adding that, during 2006 and 2007, he completed more than 100 paintings each year. He's slowed down somewhat, now doing 40 to 50 a year. He also tried his hand at creating pottery but that didn't go as well as his painting did. "I wanted to coil the clay like the Indians did," he says. "It was a disaster; it's hard to do."

These days, Sabatino does one one-man gallery show each year and usually builds those events around specific themes that might include Cheyenne dresses, war shirts, Ghost Dance dresses, tobacco bags from different tribes, and pottery from various pueblos. He enjoys composing his pieces, a task that comes rather easily for him with his background in graphic design.

"I have a great sense of lighting," he says, adding that he also has a good sense of what items will work well together in a painting. That might include white calla lilies in a vase against a dark background and surrounded by Santa Clara pottery or an old photograph placed with pottery and bags, which lends another dimension to the painting.

As he paints, Sabatino strives to make his work realistic but not look like a photograph. "I try to keep the hand of the artist in there," he says.

He values comments by viewers of his paintings, many of whom ask him if he is part Indian. "I feel good about that," Sabatino says. "I hope I'm honoring them and their culture. Way back when, the great works of Indian art were usually made by the women; God bless them. They were raising children, moving tipis, and doing great artwork, using pieces of



quill or beads. They were great artists. It's nice to keep that alive."

Asked how he paints the colorful beads, Sabatino laughs and says, "That's a secret. I use an old number one brush and cut the hairs down to the metal. I put drop after drop of paint on the canvas, and that becomes my beading. The hardest thing is working out the design when putting down the beading so I do it on graph paper first. Then I break it down into colors. I do 100 beads in a square inch." The most beads he's ever painted in one piece, he adds, was on an 1885 Blackfoot beaded yoke; that bead count was a whopping 50,000.

Sabatino also paints animals but doesn't show them because, he says, "the few times I did, people wanted to see my Indian work. I also do old saddles but not as often as I would like to. And I've done spurs, toys, moose heads, a close up of a wolf—I've tried everything."

Sabatino is currently preparing for a one-man show in August at a gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and is planning to complete 15 to 20 pieces for that event. He'll be hard at work in his studio, which includes a space where Millie works on her jewelry.

He loves sharing that space—and his life—with the woman who captured his heart more than 65 years ago. If he has one request of her, he says, it's that she give him a warning before she begins working. He is often so immersed in his own work that he doesn't realize Millie has entered the studio. "I had to ask




1890 Arapaho Ghost Dance Dress II, oil, 48" by 30"

"The ghost dance doctrine brought hope. It promised destruction of the white man, the return of the buffalo and old Indian ways."

her to tell me when she's going to start working," he says, "because banging on that anvil scares the hell out of me!"

Life has been good for Sabatino, who has realized great success in

advertising, fine art, and marriage. "Hopefully, I'll still be painting when I'm 90," he says. "It's a fine life." 

Vicki Stavig is editor of Art of the West.